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# change wars

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## Chapter 13

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# Have Theory, Will Travel: A Theory of Action for System Change

Michael Fullan

A theory is a way of organizing ideas that makes sense of the world. A *theory of action* is a way of understanding the world that identifies insights and ideas for effectively improving it. This chapter is about a theory of action for whole-system improvement in education. There are three conditions a theory must meet to be called a theory of action: First, it must meet the *systemness* criterion. Do the ideas stand a chance of addressing the whole system, not just a few hundred schools here and there? Second, the theory must make a compelling case that using the ideas will result in positive *movement*. We are, after all, talking about improvement—transitioning from one state of being to another. Third, such a theory must demonstrably tap into and stimulate people's *motivation*. I ask the reader to consider these three criteria when assessing the theory I am about to offer, and when comparing it with other competing theories of action: To what extent does this theory meet the systemness, movement, and motivation criteria? To what extent do other theories meet the criteria?

This theory of action—A Theory of Action for System Change, or TASC—has been built by myself and others with attempts at system reform since 1997, first in England, and then, more recently, in Ontario. I have had an opportunity to draw on and test the theory in relation to the research literature on large-scale reform, and in comparison to the best research on successful businesses (Fullan, 2008a). Most significantly, we have had a golden opportunity to apply much of the theory to reform in the public school system in Ontario since 2003 and now heading into 2011 with 2 million students, in 4,900 schools and 72 districts. Improving large systems is a complex task, so I consider these ideas a work in progress—all the more reason to make them clear and up for debate.

In presenting this theory, I will take special care to identify the underlying thinking. In education, there is too much reliance on models, technologies, and strategic plans. These tools can be useful, but they are only tools. The best theories are only as good as the mindset using them. William Duggan's *Strategic Intuition* (2007) makes the same case. Strategic plans, which abound in the business literature, are of limited use, says Duggan, because they do "not tell you how to come up with a strategic idea" in the first place (p. 3). According to Duggan, it is not imagination that counts, but rather it is discovery through cumulative action and insight. Gawande (2007) makes a similar point when he says breakthroughs occur during "the infant science of improving performance" (p. 242). It is learning by doing, but it is really learning by *thinking* in relation to doing.

Experience precedes insight. In cases of innovation, people do not develop a vision and then implement it; instead, they have purposeful experiences and then gain insight that they build upon. Consolidation through reasoning follows experience and insight. Duggan (2007) explains it this way: Step 1 is to look in the laboratories of the other practitioners, step 2 is to examine your own experiences, and step 3 is your reason—action, insight, reason. A theory



of action about change, then, depends on insight that derives from experience, purposeful and otherwise.

Because this chapter is about whole system reform, the system leaders (politicians and bureaucrats) responsible for leading reform and the academics working on these issues will be most interested in this theory of action. But the theory is also valuable for practitioners. Superintendents and other district administrators can use the theory as if the system was the district and they are attempting to bring about districtwide reform. Principals and teacher leaders can apply the six components of the theory to changing their own school cultures and for determining how to link to the external infrastructure. Many of the ideas in this chapter furnish practical strategies for school principals as outlined in *What's Worth Fighting for in the Principalship* (Fullan, 2008b).

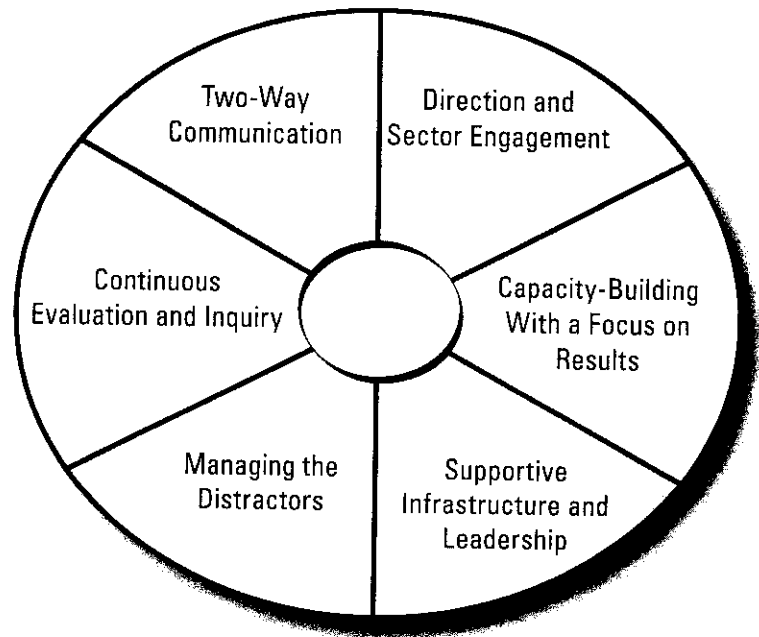
The theory I will present has come from at least a decade of action-insight-reason. For each component of the theory, I will describe its meaning, discuss the underlying thinking that supports the component, and offer evidence of the theory's validity.

### **A Theory of Action for System Change (TASC)**

Figure 1 shows the six components of TASC: 1) direction and sector engagement, 2) capacity-building with a focus on results, 3) supportive infrastructure and leadership, 4) managing the distractors, 5) continuous evaluation and inquiry, and 6) two-way communication. Each of the six components of the theory has several elements that must be understood. It is easy to get a theory of action wrong as nuanced meaning is everything. Keep in mind that at the outset, all six components are interrelated, and they are all addressed simultaneously.

#### **Direction and Sector Engagement**

The first component we will discuss is direction and sector engagement. In this component, direction from the top, in this case



**Figure 1: A Theory of Action for System Change (TASC)**

the government, is especially important and consists of at least five aspects:

1. An inspirational overall vision
2. A small number of ambitious goals publicly stated
3. A guiding coalition
4. Investment of resources
5. A sense of flexibility and partnership with the field

### **An Inspirational Overall Vision**

An *inspirational vision* means having a clear overall picture of the purpose, nature, and rationale of the reform. The vision must contain both the purpose of the reform *and* how it will be achieved. The vision taps into the moral imperative of educational reform—raising the bar and closing the gap for all children. It articulates



why and how education is key to societal prosperity. It calls for and seeks public confidence in the education system. It is invitational rather than narrowly prescriptive, and it invites partnership with the education sector and other elements of society. It combines direction and flexibility. Finally, its essence is non-negotiable. To do all this, leadership at the center has to “get it right”—that is, create a vision that attracts stakeholders to the articulated reform. For a good recent example of an inspirational vision, see *Energizing Ontario Education: Reach Every Student* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008).

### **A Small Number of Ambitious Goals Publicly Stated**

Many governments make the mistake of having a large number of equally desirable goals that overwhelm schools and fragment their efforts. Instead, governments need to choose a small number of critical ambitious goals and then stay the course. Ontario, for example, has three core priorities: literacy, numeracy, and high school graduation. It is essential to focus on these goals while not conceiving them narrowly. They can and must be conceived as higher order learning goals, and linked to other parts of the curriculum, such as the arts and character education. A small number of goals can have a significant impact on the well-being of the whole child, and they can be achieved more realistically.

One of the most controversial aspects of central goal-setting concerns whether or not to have targets. Andy Hargreaves and I have an ongoing debate about this. Neither of us is wholly in favor of or wholly against targets. If targets are imposed, we both agree that they will become dysfunctional. My theory of action says that people do better if they have some outcome against which their efforts can be assessed. To me, it is okay to have an umbrella target as long as it is not obsessively pursued. In any case, the most important element in any target is to be able to assess how well you are doing relative to your starting point, to keep track of this on an

annual basis, and to determine progress on a 3-year rolling cycle. Doing this serves as both a strategy for improvement (along with daily assessment *for* learning methods) and as an external accountability device. Thus, schools compare themselves 1) to themselves, 2) to other schools in similar circumstances, and 3) to an absolute or external standard. The caution is to not obsess on the target, but rather keep it as a focus of aspiration.

### **A Guiding Coalition**

A guiding coalition is critical to the success of the reform. At first this involves the six or seven key leaders at the center of the reform and their advisers—the Premier, Minister, Deputy Minister, and others, in the Ontario example. They need to meet frequently enough to be clear and consistent about all six elements of the theory of action. As strategy development progresses, the guiding coalition extends to include other leaders at other layers of the system, such as district leaders and school leaders, as well as other vertical leadership such as teacher unions, administrative organizations, and school trustees.

### **Investment of Resources**

Any new system improvement requires investment. It will need funding, reallocation of resources, and the time and expertise of those involved. In one sense, it is a *quid pro quo* proposition—the initial and recurring investment is amplified with greater commitment from other levels of the system. As success evolves, additional resource investment comes to be seen as money well spent.

### **A Sense of Flexibility and Partnership With the Field**

Finally, none of this direction and engagement is unidirectional or simply top-down. It includes clear and firm direction as we have seen, but also a keen sense of partnership with the field, and flexibility according to local needs and variation.



A key part of direction from the center of the reform is to establish engagement with the education sector—schools and districts in particular. Quite often, systems do not function in a way in which teachers, principals, and district educators experience the education of students as the core priority. The goal of the center of the reform should be to identify the small number of ambitious priorities that are likely to resonate with local schools. Part of the solution, then, is to anticipate and capture what is likely to align with local educators. As this is contemplated, it is essential to connect with the field to determine if the identified agenda seems to be on the right track.

Communication, additional new resources, and engagement in capacity-building (element two in Figure 1) all serve to confirm that the selected direction is seen as desirable. We have found that starting with literacy and numeracy at the elementary level is bound to resonate with stakeholders, provided that it is not imposed in a narrow manner. You can predict that going deeper in literacy and numeracy will be a solid start—as long as this is not pursued in a narrow fashion, and as long as the agenda is expansive (such as literacy across the curriculum), there is plenty to do to move literacy and numeracy forward. The idea is to have sufficient two-way communication with the field (districts, schools, and classrooms) so that literacy and numeracy becomes a goal for all.

The test of the theory of action at this stage is whether the center and those in the field generally agree on the path being pursued. The crucial goal of sector engagement is that local educators find the agenda desirable not because it is the government's agenda, but rather because it is also valued locally. No local educator will or should ever be sufficiently motivated to implement a priority just because it is the government's plan—it has to make sense locally as well. Sector engagement means that the center and locals find a common goal worth pursuing jointly. The idea is to pursue an agenda with purpose and with a view to expanding the focus



(literacy and numeracy in the Ontario example) across the curriculum, and to connect these developments with the well-being of the whole child.

### **Underlying Thinking**

If we probe the underlying thinking of the direction and sector engagement element of the theory of action, the assumption is that systems will not improve without system leadership of a certain kind—leadership that realizes that top-down reform does not work, nor do decentralized bottom-up strategies. Rather, system leaders strive for a blended model of simultaneous top-down/bottom-up forces: top-down direction and investment coupled with bottom-up capacity-building. In a word, system leaders direct but do not try to micromanage the change. They trust the process and their theory of action embedded across the six elements of the theory.

Sector engagement is key and represents a dilemma: If the government imposes the reform, locals will reject the agenda. If the center is laissez-faire, there will be little direction. The goal of sector engagement is to begin to foster a “we-we” sense of identity: Every effort is extended to show that those in the field and those at the center of the reform have a common interest. The Theory of Action for System Change—all six components—make it much more likely that those involved will find common ground. Take, for example, the evolution of the second component: capacity-building.

### **Capacity-Building With a Focus on Results**

Capacity-building is at the heart of TASC. This component consists of the strategies and actions that mobilize capacity defined as 1) new knowledge, skills, and competencies, 2) additional resources (time, ideas, money, expertise), and 3) new motivation on the part of all to put in the effort to get results.

There are two separate but related dimensions of capacity. One concerns the pedagogical or instructional core of the change, such



as effective instructional practices in literacy and numeracy from the Ontario example. The other equally necessary component relates to the management of change—how to build professional learning communities, manage distractors, achieve focus, motivate implementers, link to the various parts of the infrastructure, and so on.

Within capacity, one of the highest yield competencies relates to the deep and frequent use of data. It concerns establishing daily practices of assessment for learning, or, more accurately, assessment *as* learning in which curriculum, instruction, and assessment in relation to individual students' learning are synergized. Instruction and assessment become seamless (see Fullan, Hill, & Crévola, 2006).

Capacity-building with a focus on results also means using assessment of learning simultaneously as an additional strategy for improvement. I have already introduced this element in the first component of our theory. Schools begin to measure and track progress relative to their own starting point and to external standards. The internal accountability within the school or district also serves as external accountability to the state.

Capacity-building itself is promoted directly from the center of the reform with respect to providing training, curriculum resources, and the like, but its most powerful form is *indirect*. By indirect capacity-building, I mean the use of deliberate strategies designed to help peers learn from each other—within schools, across schools, and across districts. We call this *lateral capacity-building*, and it is most powerful because educators are learning from their colleagues. The central leaders have a proactive role in funding and coordinating these activities. They seek best ideas wherever they can be found and use the “wisdom of the crowd” to spread and assess their worth and impact.

This theory of action is proactive but constructive. This is crucial for situations in which there is underperformance or stagnation. Intervention in these situations is necessary, but it must be

capacity-driven rather than judgmental. Intervention is judgmental when poor performance is identified in a negative or pejorative way. The question is not whether the judgment is warranted, but rather what will motivate and enable people to make improvements. It is better to assume that lack of capacity is the problem and tackle that first. In Ontario, we have been able to establish a turnaround school program—the Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership (OFIP)—in which more than 1,000 of the 4,000 elementary schools have been involved. The concept is to identify problematic situations in schools, avoid stigmatizing the schools, and then to engage them in turnaround capacity-building. In 2006–2007, these schools gained 10 additional percentage points in literacy and numeracy than the rest of the system (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008).

Capacity-building, then, encompasses the following:

- Knowledge, resources, and motivation
- Instruction and management of change expertise
- Assessment *for* as well as assessment *of* learning
- Direct and indirect capacity-building
- A link between capacity and results
- Early and continuous intervention in case of need

### **Underlying Thinking**

The neglect of capacity-building has been the fatal weakness of reform policies such as No Child Left Behind. Politicians generally favor more direct external accountability schemes. By contrast, TASC argues that capacity is *sine qua non* of improvement. New capacities *cause* results. Moreover, capacity enhancement is motivational. There is nothing like getting better at something important to want to do more of it. Capacity-building enhances ownership, and capacity-building is empowering. When people become excellent at something, they become experts. They become, for example,



more critical of ill-conceived external ideas. Other potentially good but insufficiently developed ideas that might have been started from the center become tempered by the expertise of skilled practitioners. Empowered, competent people also talk back when the situation calls for it.

Finally, internal (within the school) and external (in relation to the public) accountability become interrelated. An effective balance between the two is established as a platform for moving forward. Intervention programs are capacity-driven and seem to serve accountability for the better because they get results with less rancor.

### **Supportive Infrastructure and Leadership**

All of this work requires a strong infrastructure to support and propel it. For this component, we have used the concept of *tri-level reform*: What has to happen at the government, district, and school/community levels to engage in the depth of change required.

At the government level, most state departments and ministries of education do not have the culture and capacity to lead the work. Thus, new structural and cultural arrangements are required. It need not and should not result in new layers of bureaucracy, but rather it should involve reconfiguring and adding to existing resources. But beware of the folly of doing yet another reorganization, as my colleague Ben Levin (twice Deputy Minister) warns. Reorganizations are distractors and thus should be kept to a minimum.

Ontario created a Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (as did England) staffed by some existing ministry personnel, but significantly strengthened by respected practitioners from schools and districts. The goal of this project at the government level is to work on changing the internal culture of the ministry, and to establish a new two-way partnership with the other levels, district and school. Needless to say, capacity-building is required at the department of education level.

We are all learning more about the characteristics of effective districts, and they are congruent with the theory of action espoused in this chapter: focus on instruction, use data, develop capacity, foster leadership, build learning communities, link to results, and so on (see, for example, Childress, Elmore, Grossman, & Johnson, 2007). Near the beginning of a new change process, some districts will be ahead of the government, so to speak, and others will be behind. The goal, then, is to develop the capacity of school districts so that they can lead in two directions—one as an effective infrastructure to their schools (with all the simultaneous top-down/bottom-up strategies that this implies), and the other as a proactive agent vis-à-vis the government. Districts need to become semi-autonomous but engaged players vertically and laterally with other districts. At the school and community level, the new capacities of leading collaborative cultures need to be firmly embraced. Principal and teacher leadership is required for this task.

It is obvious that new forms of leadership are required at all three levels. We need leaders who can focus on details and look at the bigger picture simultaneously. There are now impressive “qualifications frameworks” and corresponding programs for school principals. We also need formal and informal leadership development programs for all leaders. In the Ontario example, we are working with many change agents: school principals, superintendents, literacy and numeracy coaches and mentors, and student success leaders (high school teacher change agents). Once you proliferate a critical mass of change agent leaders focusing individually and collectively on capacity-building linked to results, you have a set of powerful change forces that in many ways has a life of its own.

In sum, several components are required for the development of a supportive infrastructure and leadership:

- Capacity development for each of the three levels: government, district, and school



- A degree of coordination and rapport across the three levels
- Leadership development for the change agents working in the infrastructure

### **Underlying Thinking**

It is obvious that capacity-building will not develop on its own. It requires a refocused infrastructure whose main work is to build capacity with a link to results. Capacity-building represents an enormous and never-ending task. And if you do not refocus and refurbish the work of the infrastructure, it will continue to do whatever work it is cut out to do. Left alone, it specializes in bureaucracy—some of it necessary, but much of it unnecessary. Over the years, bureaucracy has become one of the main hazards to system reform. Bureaucratic distractors take us away from the core business of teaching and learning.

### **Managing the Distractors**

In complex political systems, distractors are ubiquitous and inevitable. To minimize them, it helps to build up the positive side of the reform—a relentless focus on capacity-building—but you have to be equally explicit and aware of addressing distractors by preempting some, and dealing with others as they come in a way that does not divert and sap energy.

A main distractor to address is collective bargaining. It is not always possible, but more and more provinces in Canada, for example, are seeking and achieving 4-year collective agreements that usher in a period of relative peace and stability. Other potential distractors are managerial tasks such as paperwork, finances, building issues, safety, personnel, and so on. In *What's Worth Fighting for in the Principalship* (Fullan, 2008b), I give specific recommendations for both principals and system leaders for dealing with these types of distractors.

It is clear that effective schools and effective districts are better at addressing distractors and maintaining focus, and we must work at spreading those crucial habits. Guiding coalitions and other leaders at all levels of effective schools train themselves to make teaching and learning the core preoccupation and find ways to reduce the debilitating impact of distractors.

### **Underlying Thinking**

We all complain about distractors inhibiting our ability to get the main work done. The difference in our TASC framework is that the concept of distractors becomes an item for analysis and action. People discover small and big ways to make distractors less consuming. Every hour saved is an hour gained for improvement work because every frustration experienced from negative diversions drains energy at the expense of learning priorities. Since time and energy are of the essence in school improvement, harnessing the resources to effectively reduce distractors produces substantial benefits.

### **Continuous Evaluation and Inquiry**

A theory, in essence, is a set of tested hypotheses about reality. It is never assumed to be valid once and for all. Rather, the assumption is that a theory must always be subject to assessment in relation to today's realities and future realities. It is for this reason that constant evaluation and inquiry must be built into the mindset of the reform and the actions of the center and those in the field as the reform progresses. Leaders at all levels are expected to have an inquiring disposition: Are we implementing the strategy effectively? Is it working? Are there any surprises? What are we learning? And so on.

In addition, any theory of change worth its salt must continuously search for and spread effective practices for the task at hand, whether these are found in the system or in the worldwide literature. And assessment of implementation is a must to determine what is working and where, as well as what is not working and why.



For example, in the third year of Ontario's Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, the Secretariat identified and conducted case studies of 8 of the 72 school districts that seemed to have sound strategies in place and were getting results. These case studies were fed back to the districts in question and made available to the system as a whole, prompting numerous site visits to learn about the specific strategies being employed.

Theories of action should also employ third-party evaluators to provide critical feedback on the strengths, weaknesses, and impact of the strategies being employed. And systems should disseminate their theories and findings on a larger international level to contribute to the thinking of others and to be subjected to external scrutiny and critique. This chapter in *Change Wars* is a case in point. Further, systems should benchmark their efforts against the increasingly sophisticated and detailed international assessments of student achievement conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in its Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and by other international agencies.

### **Underlying Thinking**

You have to practice what you preach. Modeling ongoing inquiry sends a powerful message, and you learn things essential to improvement. You are always testing and refining your theory of action. You learn to get better by gaining strategic insights of the kind that Duggan (2007) discusses. He says that such purposeful work builds on "intelligent memory" (what you have been experiencing) in a way that sparks new insights leading to more effective action. Such "flashes of insight" do not occur every day, but they are bound to emerge if you are immersed in implementing the kind of theory described in this chapter.



### Two-Way Communication

If you do not have a sound theory of action, if your vision is mostly rhetoric, or if the vision espouses goals but is relatively silent on strategy, no amount of communication will get you anywhere. But if the strategy is solid, communication is of the utmost importance.

The first step to effective two-way communication within the education sector is taking every opportunity to state the reform strategy. This will help clarify it in the mind of the communicator, it will help clarify it for others, and it will provide ample opportunity for feedback and refinement. This is an exercise in giving and receiving information. Further, because this communication is coupled with action (for example, capacity-building experiences), the meaning becomes increasingly ingrained in the minds of educators. Leaders at all three levels—school, district, and state—should be able to articulate the strategy with a high degree of consistency and agreement, which also supports greater commitment by all.

The communication component of TASC is very much a two-way street: speaking and listening go hand in hand. Feedback from two-way communication provides ideas for reshaping or refining a strategy, and problems with implementation are often revealed and can then be acted upon. People know that leaders are not perfect, so being open about problems is necessary, and it can be seen as a sign of strength in a leader as problems are addressed.

Communication with the broader public is more complex. One of the most fundamental goals of system improvement, which should be stated and restated publicly, is to increase the public's confidence in the public education system. Since this is a goal and since transparency is part of our theory, evidence has to be constantly communicated to parents and the community. It is equally critical to situate the public school system in relation to societal improvement. The ultimate goals of system reform—literate and numerate citizens, social cohesion along with diversity, the development of positive



character traits, low poverty, economic prosperity, and the general well-being and happiness of the population—all figure into the reform, not through the education system alone, but as a vital part of the larger community. We are, after all, talking about *societal* improvement.

Communication should be both small and big. Sometimes it is about individual school success, about parent engagement at both the local and school levels, and other times it is about the health of the society as a whole. In short, communication is an opportunity to disseminate and receive feedback, especially when communication is about vision and strategy. It is highly meaningful and commitment-generating when it is grounded in capacity-building, based in evidence, and related to solving and identifying problems. The outcome of good communication is prosperity and society's positive well-being.

### **Underlying Thinking**

Change strategies in large systems are complex. It seems that a perennial complaint is that people do not see the big picture. Maybe the problem is that system leaders do not, in fact, have a clear policy, especially with respect to implementing the change. Or maybe people interpret the same policy differently. How many leaders have complained that their policies are crystal clear but practitioners seem to misunderstand or misinterpret them?

Policies and strategies require many more times the communication than you might rationally feel is sufficient. And when you articulate strategies along with progress or lack thereof, you become more clear, you monitor and spur implementation, and you continually link to people's ongoing new experiences. Communicate often, but be sure you have something specific to communicate about.

### Bringing New Ideas to the Surface

This six-part theory of action for system improvement is grounded in intensive action of more than 10 years, and it holds up well when compared to evidence in the wider literature. Using TASC in Ontario, for example, has increased literacy and numeracy within 4 years, reduced (but by no means eliminated) the achievement gap, cut teacher attrition in the first 3 years of teaching by more than two thirds, and increased the morale of all (McIntyre, 2006; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008). We continue to expand what we consider to be desirable education outcomes, such as the well-being of the whole child; the relationship between literacy, numeracy, and the arts; greater parent engagement; and so on. And these broader outcomes redound on the action theory itself and its components, resulting in continuous improvement of the theory.

There is still much work to be done in Ontario and in other jurisdictions that are showing strong interest in the ideas implemented there. You may ask, "What if the leaders of my government, district, or school are not interested in a theory of action that I know has great promise?" Well, one of the reasons we put new theories of action into place and then report on them is to provide people with ideas that they can promulgate and use. But in the final analysis, you have to do what you can in the situation in which you find yourself. At a minimum, you should influence your immediate sphere of relationships by advocating and supporting the actions embedded in our theory of action.

Finally, the theory of action presented here is just one theory; it is open to critique. It is this critical analysis that brings new ideas to the surface. Remember the criteria for an effective theory of action presented in the beginning of the chapter: It must promote system change, movement toward improvement, and motivation. Critique of existing strategies brings system reform to ever-higher levels as long as it is done with sound reasoning, evidence, and alternative



recommendations. This is what “change wars” are all about—debating and sorting out promising theories of action. I maintain that the theory outlined in this chapter stands up well to empirical scrutiny. Good theories of action have another advantage—they “travel well” to other problems and jurisdictions, as I have shown in the six secrets of change (Fullan, 2008a). Give me a good theory of action over a strategic plan any day of the week.

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